German Expressionistic Dance: its origin and development through the 20th century

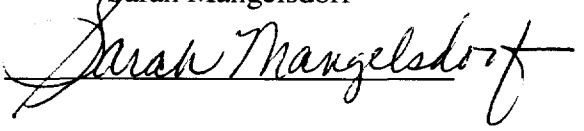
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Angeline M. Ratts

Thesis Advisor

Sarah Mangelsdorf



Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

May, 98

graduation May 9, 1998

Table of Contents

Introduction

This thesis began as a personal search to understand my choreographic style. I have done quite a bit of choreography during my time in the Ball State dance department, and after a certain amount of time, I began to notice that my work often had very similar qualities. As a part of a senior dance project, I was required to choreograph a dance, audition and teach it to dancers and present it in a show with the work of the other senior dance majors, called Senior Dance Projects. The dance which I created was titled "Joint Compound". It was set to the music "Providence" by King Crimson, and had five dancers in it. I was very happy with the work, and consider it a choreographic success. At the same time, I was working on an independent research project over the origins of Expressionist dance in Germany. I wanted to know what had motivated dancers like Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman to break with tradition and search for a new type of dance. The research was exciting and educational to me, and I was also very happy with the end result of my efforts.

This semester, as I searched for a topic for my senior honors thesis, I realized that "Joint Compound" could be qualified as an Expressionist work. It was then that I started to wonder about the far-reaching effects of historical developments on the dance of today. I thought that it would be fun to look at the historical influences that effect my own work, and try to do a search into the developments that Expressionist dance has gone through the 20th century. The major question that my research tried to answer was: "How did Expressionist dance survive through the decades and spread across the world to appear in my work, a young dance student in Muncie, IN?" I believe that I have found the answer to this question, and that my thesis has become a short history of Expressionistic dance in relation to my own life. This is by no means an all-encompassing account of the history of Expressionism, but rather an attestation of the effects of history on everyday life.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, and to give a clear idea of what I am referring to when I use the term "Expressionistic Dance", I have begun with a general history of the Expressionist movement in art which led to the developments in dance. This leads into the discussion of Expressionist dance, its influences and its development, through the first half of the 20th century in Germany, up to its eventual introduction in America. In

conclusion, I have done a short analysis of "Joint Compound" which shows the qualities that make it an Expressionist work. This has been a personally fulfilling and fun experience for me. I have learned quite a bit about my own artistic temperament, and I hope that it will be as fun and educational for the reader as it has been for the author.

Artists Statement

"Joint Compound"

The inspiration for my dance, *Joint Compound*, originally came from the poem "Deceptions" by Philip Larkin. The first time that I read this poem, I was truck by the power of what the writer was expressing solitude, humiliation, confusion, sadness, and outrage. In my mind I saw the image of a woman alone in a room, overcome with waves of emotion, feeling completely separated form the outside world, and wondering how and when she will ever feel better. These mental images were so strong that I immediately knew that they would one day be expressed in a dance.

A few months later, as I was starting to form ideas for my senior dance project, a friend played the song "Providence" by King Crimson for me. As I listened, the images from "Deceptions" returned to my mind, and I knew that it was time to make the dance that I had earlier envisaged. At the same time, however, I felt the desire to somehow turn all of that pain into something positive, and to bring a sort of hopeful ending to the dance, to take my interpretation of the poem a step further. As I thought it over, I realized that one way of ameliorating pain and loneliness is to understand that there are others that have similar problems and concerns. Realizing that one is part of a community gives incredible strength and has the power to conquer personal sorrows.

This what I have tried to express in my dance. It begins with five women; all so absorbed in their lives that they fail to realize the presence of others. They are slowly brought together, however, mostly thanks to their realization that the others are feeling some of the same things. The second half of the dance is about the strength that this realization has given them, both in dealing with themselves and others.

Deceptions

'Of coarse I was drugged, and so heavily I did not regain my consciousness till the next morning. I was horrified to discover that I had been ruined, and for some days I was inconsolable, and cried like a child to be killed or sent back to my aunt.' –Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*

Even so distant I can taste the grief,
Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.
The sun's occasional print, the brisk brief
Worry of wheels along the street outside.
Where bridal London bows the other way,
And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,
Forbids the scar to heal, and drives
Shame out of hiding. All the Unhurried day
Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives.

Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare
Console you if I could. What can be said,
Except that suffering is exact, but where
Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?
For you would hardly care
That you were less deceived out on that bed,
Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair
To burst into fulfillment's desolate attic.

--Philip Larkin

EXPRESSIONISM

Various scholars and critics have defined expressionism in many different ways. Expressionistic art was born out of the personal and social turmoil resulting from societal changes in the nineteenth century. It should not be considered a *style*, because of the huge stylistic differences between those artists who have been labeled Expressionists, but rather a *movement* that brought together artists with similar beliefs and rebellious tendencies. It was most popular in German and Russian art of the first 30 to 40 years of the twentieth century. Although this movement is most closely associated with German painting, it encompasses all art forms, including literature, drama, music, painting, architecture and dance. Two of Expressionism's most dominant traits art the focus on the individual and the rebellion against traditional, typically bourgeois values.

18th Century Origins of Expressionist Art

In Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, society had gone through a complete transformation. Every aspect of life had changed, including man's view of himself. The two most important political and economic changes effecting the way man looked at himself and his environment were the Industrial Revolution and the German unification. Because of these changes, traditional concepts that had governed the organization of society, such as religion, the small community and the skilled tradesman were weakened or rendered obsolete. Replacing these were the Spirit of the Machine "*der Geist der Maschine*", urbanism and big business. Many felt sad and fearful towards the present and hopeless in the face of the future.

The German Industrial Revolution took place at an amazingly fast pace. Within 20 years, it went from a largely agricultural state to a state dominated by large cities and

industry. Thanks to better medical care and hygiene, peace since 1815 and a major decline in epidemics since the end of the 19th century, there was also a population explosion, which caused severe overcrowding in these cities. The German railroad surpassed the English railroad within twenty years of its founding. This industrial growth not only brought about changes in the economy, but also reorganized the social structure. Two new classes were born: an under-privileged often exploited working class, and a class of aggressive, profit-oriented industrial bosses, the bourgeois. The small-town community, which previously had been based upon private farming and the work of skilled tradesman, was overrun by the work of big business, which had the machines to do the work faster and cheaper than ever before. This created a dichotomy in which machines made work quicker, cheaper and easier than it had been in the past, facilitating many facets of life, while the masses were often treated like these machines that had replaced them, and were forced to live under degrading, dangerous conditions.

The big political change in Germany in the nineteenth century was the unification of Germany under Prussian leadership in 1871. The need to have all people of similar languages and cultures belong to the same nation was a result of nationalistic tendencies which had been slowly increasing since as early as the 15th century. While final German unification was a huge positive step for Nationalists and placed the new Germany in a much stronger political and economic position in Europe, it still fostered a certain amount of insecurity. Many were used to being citizens of the many small German-speaking states and were weary of trusting a unified government. There was also widespread fear about Prussian domination and confusion concerning the new German identity that was suddenly thrust upon them. Many of these people sought comfort in the past, believing

that the high point of German culture and influence had passed with the Goethe period. In opposition, there were many that reveled in this new "German-ness". Many believed that the Germanic people were the greatest in Europe and that national unity would carry them far above and beyond what any other country had yet accomplished. The super-human ("Uebermensch") of which Nietzsche had spoken would finally become reality. Among these thinkers, there was high hope for the future of both the German citizens and country.

Although Germany has been used as an example of the changes that were taking place during this time period, it is not the only European country that was going through this. Both the Industrial Revolution and Nationalism had touched countries all over Europe and into Asia, and people all over were feeling the effects of this new environment. As early as the middle of the 19th century in Russia and France art began to show signs of the reaction to. In Russia, the actor and teacher Stanislavsky began calling for truer expression in theater. His theories were written down in a book, (titled *An Actor Prepares* in English), and spread quickly throughout Russia. Stanislavsky believed that the actor should find inspiration within himself, that he should "become the character" as it is often said, and not just use set gestures and mime to convey emotion. He was one of the first modern dramatists to recognize the importance of art conveying truth and reality, more closely mirroring society and going beyond its role as mere entertainment.

In France, acting teacher Francois Delsarte (1811-1871) also called for truer expression. Delsarte was interested in tapping the expression of what he identified as the three aspects of a human being: the spirit, soul and body. The body for him was a mirror of God, (with the three aspects of a human being comparable with the three parts of God:

the Father, Son and Holy Spirit), and should therefore be treated with equal respect. He developed a body training system that was meant to cultivate an understanding of these three parts, resulting in a better understanding of God. Delsarte was a leader in what would become a strong overall interest in the body. He and his followers searched for a deeper relationship with and meaning for their own bodies.

Both of these men can be seen as a reaction to the de-humanization that was resulting from societal changes. Their work calls attention to human emotions and the human body, both of which seemed to be getting forgotten amid technological advancements. Stanislavsky had a strong effect of Russian Theater art. His work called artists' attention toward a truer expression, which could result in a closer connection between the body and soul. Delsarte had a similar effect of European art. He called attention to the body's potential, and opened up doors to exploration of the relationship between the body, spirit and soul.

Developing into a movement

This interest in human emotions and the human body expressed by Stanislavsky and Delsarte and a need to react against perceived negative societal changes became the basis of German Expressionist art. Most of the artists who became famous in Germany for their Expressionistic work were either born in or lived through Germany's nineteenth century transformation, and their art was a direct revolt against that. They often came from wealthy bourgeois families and would leave their homes in disillusionment with these societies, going to the larger cities, such as Vienna, Berlin and Munich, in search of others with similar anti-bourgeois sentiment. According to Bronner and Kellner, "Most of the young artists, poets, writers, and critics (of the early Expressionist culture) came

from well-to-do families which insisted that they attend the university....Most studied law or medicine as a solid foundation for future income" (p.46) These were mostly youth whose families had directly felt the positive effects of 19th century changes, not those who had been pushed aside and forgotten with the masses. In contrast, however, with their ambitious parents and siblings, they felt the pain of the masses and saw the need for change in an unfair, often inhuman society. These bohemians most likely saw their families as representative of the capitalist societies that fostered corruption and denied human nature.

In café's around Germany and Austria, young artists and philosophers speculated about what they saw as the alienation of the individual in the modern world. They, like Stanislavsky, Delsarte and other revolutionary 19th century thinkers, saw the need for a reaffirmation of the individual and a revolt against the de-humanization of industrialization. According to Bronner and Kellner, the art that resulted from this "café culture" contained "impulses toward the fulfillment and spiritual realization of the individual combined with revolts against repressive socio-cultural conditions." (p.8) Each searched for an individual expressive style, one that would reaffirm his personality and individuality. Some common themes that can be seen throughout Expressionist art are sexual freedom, passion and intensity, alienation and human subjectivity.
Expressionism went through a series of changes, and has been separated into time periods based on the general focus of the works produced in each one. The first was before 1914. See the reproductions on pages 12-13 for examples of this. Overall, the work seems very negative with twisted perspectives that lead to what has been called an aesthetic of ugliness. Yet in the midst of its protests and negativity, there contains a promise of

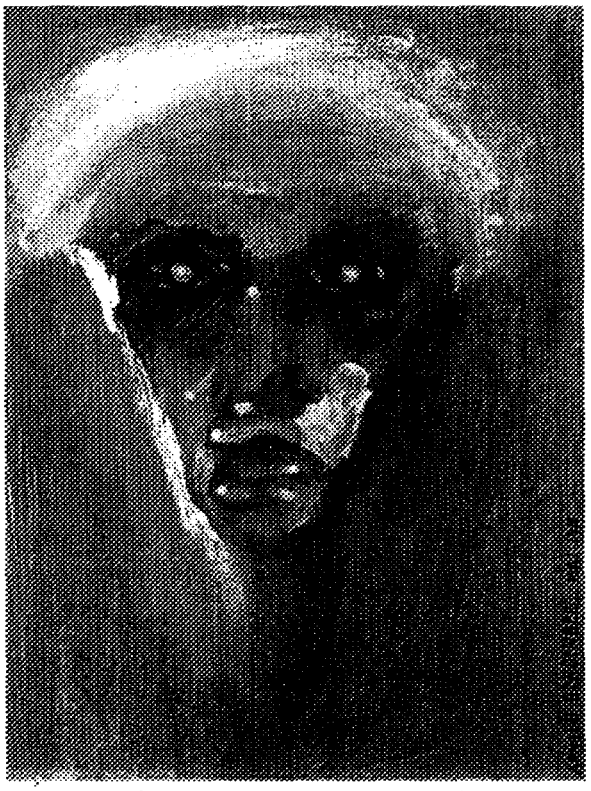
renewal. There is a certain degree of hope in these artists' search for the human and individual among rampant de-humanization of modern society. The paintings show love, bodily freedom and a degree of warmth in human relationships.

The monstrosities of WWI soon nullified this touch of optimism. After 1914, the Expressionist's work was significantly more pessimistic, concentrating on latent hope and manifest despair derived from mass death and destruction of the war. Looking at the Expressionist art from the Weimar years, one sees very little hope in the eyes and hearts of the artists, many of which not only lived through, but were solders in the war. See the reproductions of Weimar-period Expressionistic art on pages 14-15 for examples of this. There is no longer hope for the salvation of the individual and society in the modern world, but rather the artist's necessity to bring meaning to his own personal suffering.

Expressionist Art before 1914

Egon Schiele, Dead Mother, 1910

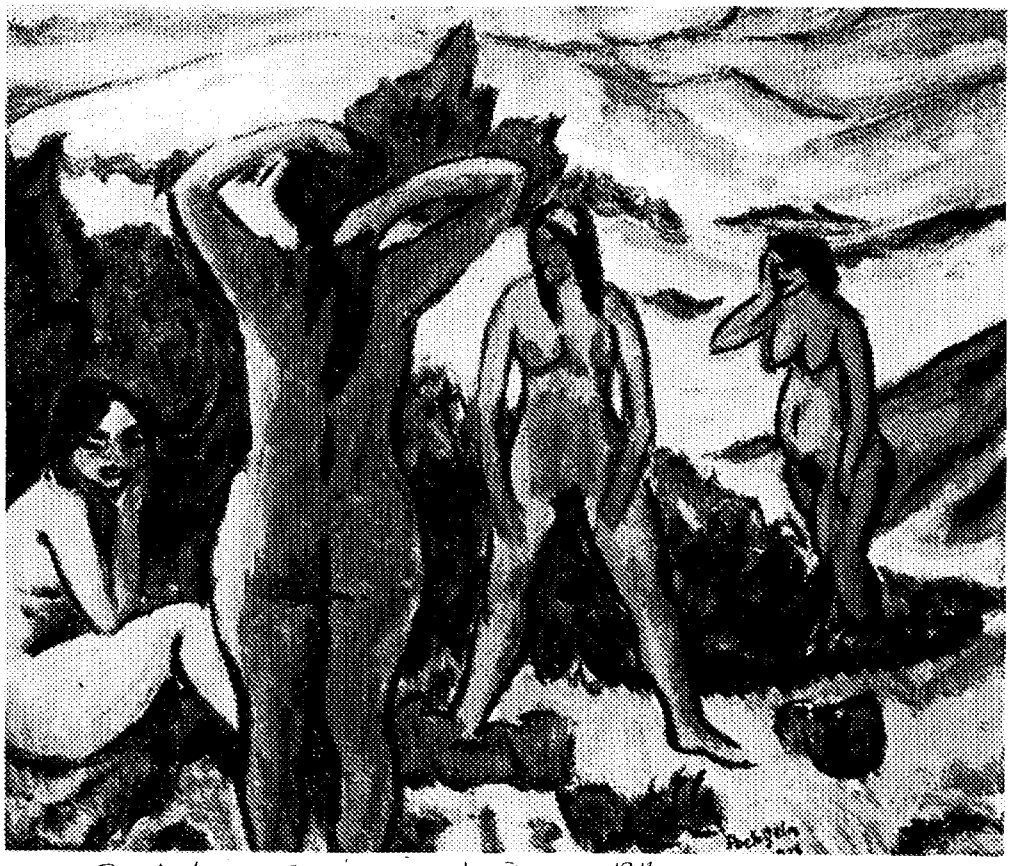
Oskar kokoschka, Murder, Hope of Women, 1909



Arnold Schoenburg, The Red Stare, 1910

Christian Rohlfs, Birch Forest, 1907

Oskar Kokoschka, The Tempest, 1914



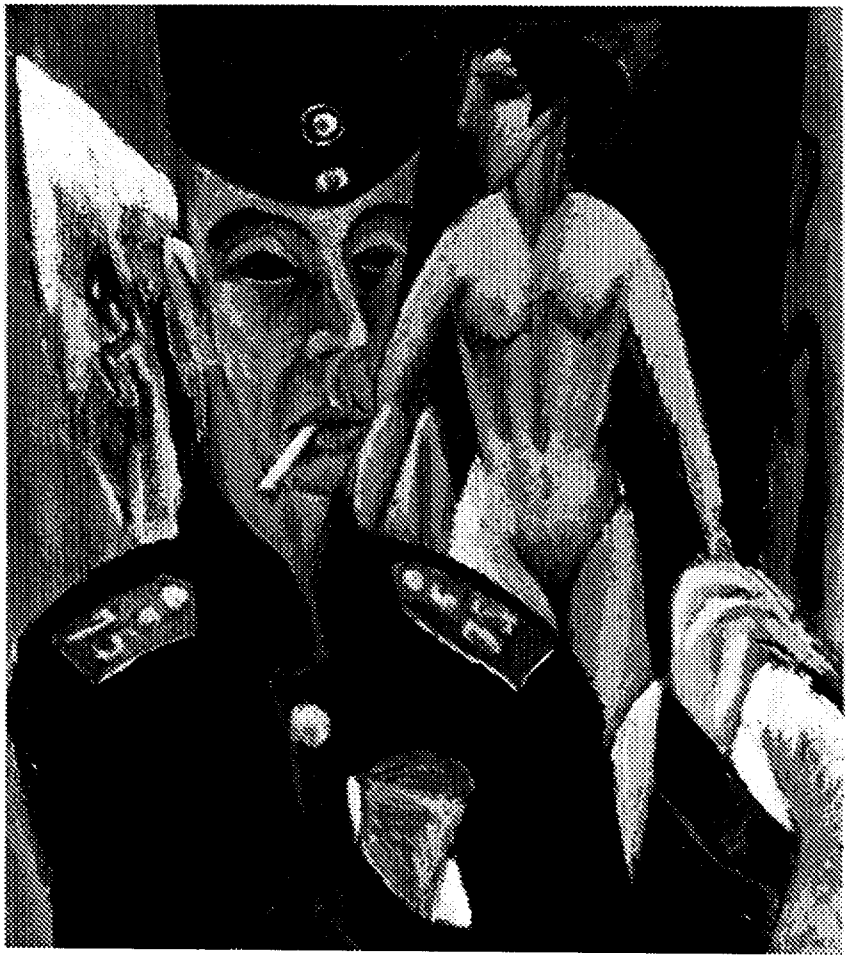
Max Pechstein, Evening on the Dunes, 1911

Expressionist Art after 1914

Max Pechstein, Self-Portrait with Death, 1920

Alfred Kubin, Torch of War, 1914

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Artillerymen, 1915



EXPRESSIONIST DANCE

Expressionistic dance, like all expressionist art, was born out of the individual's need to reassure himself in the face of new societal values and beliefs. Dancers championed a new respect for the body and asserted dance as the ideal art, which unlike the others required the use of all man's resources: body, mind and spirit. The Expressionist dancers made dance into a means of gaining understanding of the human being as a whole, following trends which were developing in the other arts. As opposed to the general Expressionist movement, Expressionist dance did develop its own style. Much inspiration was taken from primitive art and dancing, and dances had more personal than political or social meaning. Movement was weighted and grounded and greater significance was given to various aspects of the dancer's relationship with his environment, such as the space around him, the ground, and the objects in or near the performing space and other dancers and spectators.

Origins of the Expressionist Dancers

Expressive dance got its roots mainly from three places: the work of Isadora Duncan, the Ballets Russes and the body culture (Koerperkultur) of the turn of the century. Together, these three influences overturned traditional stage dance, planting the seeds for Expressionist dancers and choreographers throughout the world.

Isadora Duncan was an American dancer who literally overturned the world of dance by presenting dances that were completely based upon emotional interpretation and expression, void of any traditional technique. She believed that true creative expression

was not dependent upon technical mastery, but rather free movement, which leads to an honest expression of the self. She danced barefoot in very loose, flowing costumes, and her movement was a simple extension of natural everyday movements, such as walking, jumping, running, hugging, gesturing, etc. Mararet Lloyd, in *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, describes Duncan's movement in the following way: "She held (her arms) naturally, never in a fixed, formalized style, the hands easy, the fingers not artificially curved ... her face and neck were mobile and expressive ... The movements were round without softness, there was more symmetry than asymmetry, more melody than counterpoint." (p.4) From this description, one gets the sense that she relied most heavily on free flowing movement which spontaneously developed out of what she naturally felt at the moment of movement rather than on any pre-planned ways of moving.

Duncan had an enormous effect on world dance. As she began touring, her popularity spread quickly, especially in Europe and Russia. People saw her as the liberator of dancers and leader of a renaissance in theater dance. Although her freed way or moving inspired many, her strongest legacy was her belief that dances should have themes that are direct expressions of his or her own life. In her autobiography, Duncan says: "My Art is just an effort to express the truth of my Being in gesture and movement ... From the first I have only danced my life." (p.8-9) Elements of this philosophy were taken on by all of the early Expressionist choreographers. After Duncan, there was a great stress on honesty and openness of movement and theme in theater dance.

The Ballets Russes, in contrast to Duncan, attempted to reform dance by bending the rules within traditional technique, taking it to a higher level in order to find new expressive possibilities. While it is considered a ballet company because of the close ties

that it kept with ballet technique, it is nevertheless an important forerunner of Expressionist dance. The original members of this company were artists who had been trained at what at the time was the most prestigious ballet school in the world, *the School of the Imperial Russian Ballet* in St. Petersburg. The company's artistic coordinator, Serge Diaghilev, wanted to revolutionize ballet, an art form that he saw as stale and living in the past. To accomplish this, he hired only the most talented dancers and choreographers and pushed them to break the traditional rules of classical ballet. The work of his company succeeded in bringing a new emotionalism and psychological intensity to the art, bringing it into the 20th century. In addition, he brought ballet into contact with the rest of the arts by using accomplished visual artists and musicians to provide the music, sets and costumes for all of his new ballets. Although there is a very long list of Ballet Russes dancers and choreographers who helped reform dance, the two that had the earliest, if not strongest, effect on expressive dance are Michel Fokine and Vaslav Nijinsky.

Michel Fokine was the first choreographer for the Ballets Russes. While still fairly young, he was already making a name for himself in Russia for his innovative ballets. Fokine had a much more current approach to ballet than the greater part of his contemporaries. He had seen Duncan dance in Russia, and wanted to bring her ideas to the ballet. According to Fokine, dancers should portray real characters, time periods, places and emotions. He instructed his dancers to create their characters from within, (much like Stanislavsky had done before him with actors), calling the miming that had previously done fake and superficial. While Noverre had called for the same things in the 16th century, it wasn't until Fokine that full body expressiveness was synthesized with the

use of classical technique. In many ways he helped pave the way for a compromise between the expressionistic tendencies of the time period and the traditionally superficial classical dance.

Vaslav Nijinsky took Fokine's reforms of ballet a step further, going so far as to create what could be called a new technique distinctly different from, yet still loosely based on the classical tradition. Many scholars claim that Nijinsky's choreography would be more appropriately called the world's first examples of Expressionist dance, as opposed to merely being an extension of classicism, because his movement and choice of theme go against all classical rules. The themes of Nijinsky's ballets were all psychologically probing, based upon the primitive aspect of humanity. (The early Expressionist often turned to the primitive for inspiration.)

Nijinsky was the first prominent choreographer to turn around the classical technique for expressive purposes. His style of dance was very introspective, turned in, grounded and often even animalistic in nature, qualities that Expressionist technique would become known for. His dances probed such intense subjects as death, sexual need, sexual attraction and the animal side of humanity. The dance spectators of the world had never before seen this. While it caused widespread scandal and disgust, it opened even more possibilities for expression in dance, paving the way for most of the work of the early expressionist dancers.

The final and perhaps strongest influence on the early Expressionist dancers was the body culture, ("Koerperkultur") of turn-of-the-century Europe. As a result of the changes in living conditions that were discussed in the first section of this paper, people were also forced to reevaluate the purpose and condition of their bodies. Machines and

city living forced people to move differently than they ever had before, and the rampant de-humanization that many felt on all levels of daily experience forced them to find new ways of reassuring their humanity. Many turned to the human body to fill many of the voids that industrial society had created. The body began to be seen as a path to the soul, and many exercise systems were created to foster discovery of the natural movements that would lead to true spiritualism. Some examples of these are "Rhythmic Gymnastics", Wanderfogel youth groups and the Mensendiek body training system. Another method that was used to build a connection between the body and soul was "Dream Dancing", in which the dancer was hypnotized and encouraged to move freely. The ensuing movement was thought to be a direct expression of the psyche, and analyzed for its psychological and spiritual worth.

The leader in the body-soul discovering systems of the turn of the century was the musician Emile Jaques-Dalcroze. Like Delsarte, Dalcroze believed that the path to the soul was through knowledge of the body, more specifically of the body's natural movements and rhythms. Dalcroze originally developed his system, called "Rhythmic Gymnastics", which involved assigning the movement of each body part to a specific part in the music, in order to help his music students understand complex musical rhythms. Soon after he began using it, his work began to be recognized as a means of attaining body sensitivity in all aspects of life. "Rhythmic Gymnastics" was useful to men and women in a wide variety of professions for both exercise and artistic training. The Dalcroze system was particularly helpful to early Expressionist and modern dance. These dancers and choreographers often had to deal with very complex rhythms and structures in the modern music that they used, and the way Dalcroze's system

systematically broke the music down and assigned it to different body parts helped them to both mentally and physically understand it. Eventually, the popularity of this system exploded because of its synthesis of artistic and physical sensibility, and it was used not only by dancers, but also by members of many other professions, to discover the body's potential.

What Duncan, the Ballets Russes and Dalcroze did for dance was to open the door for explorations into the body and the traditional theatrical dance form, ballet. Dance was opened up to a whole new type of expression both in theme and movement. Almost all of the groundbreaking Expressionist dancers of the first half of the 20th century claim inspiration from at least two of the three aforementioned people. In Germany and America pioneers of Expressionist dance developed the ideas of Duncan, Fokine, Nijinsky, Dalcroze and the Koerperkultur into their own work and developed them further.

Expressionist Dance Develops in Germany

The first person to take German theatrical dance to a new level, creating the first Expressionist dances, was Rudolf von Laban. Through his travels and association with the bohemian artists of his day, Laban was able to experience the work of many of the revolutionary artists and thinkers of his day. While he was still in his teens Laban had an interest in acting, and during a stay in Paris he was introduced to the Delsarte method. This was one of the pivotal points in his career, because the honest inner expression that Delsarte advocated method appealed strongly to him. He studied it in depth, making it the basis of his movement experiments. Other artistic philosophies that Laban took an interest in were the Arab and Negro dancing of Africa, the Mensendieck and Dalcroze

body training systems, and the history of theatrical dance, including Noverre's famous *Letters on Dancing and Ballet*, which called for more honest expression in classical dance.

It was during a four year stay in Munich between 1910 and 1914 that Laban finally centered his artistic attention on dance, and made the acquaintance of Mary Wigman, who would grow into the most successful German Expressionist dancer worldwide. According to Preston-Dunlop, it was at this time that his artistic experiments began to be almost entirely dance-related. She describes the aim of his experiments to be "to free dance from its traditional dependencies on music, narrative and set steps, by discovering the nature of its uniqueness as an art form and a human phenomenon." (P.15) Laban had great respect for the body and for the ability of dance to unlock its potential. He also believed that dance should be brought into the time period, like his Expressionist contemporaries had already done for painting, literature and drama. He envisioned a sort of community dance that would develop the connection between the body and soul and tap into the individual's artistic creativity. He soon opened up a school to teach his ideas about choreography and expressive dance, and began developing his own notation system, which allowed his choreography to be taught across the country to different Bewegungschore ("movement choirs"). The Bewegungschore, (there were 24 in central Europe by 1924), would then join together for enormous ensemble dances at festivals and presentations. This work opened theatrical dance up to more people than ever before.

In 1913, Laban was introduced to a young dancer who had just broken away from Delsarte and was searching for a new direction for her dancing. This young dancer was

Mary Wigman. She stayed and worked with him through the First World War, and together they made a name for their new form of dance. Mary Wigman eventually became the most successful of the German Expressionist dancers of the early 20th century. In many ways, she can be seen as the culmination of the popular interests in discovering the body and creating a new pure art form that were floating around Europe at that time. In the Expressionist manner, she was acutely aware of her time period, and her art was a reaction to her environment.

After Wigman broke with Lana, she began a career of her own. She achieved a following and soon there were two distinct schools of Expressionist dance in Germany. Laban was more analytically minded and interested in the community. He centered his attention on developing his own notation system and exploring the possibilities of movement as related to an icosahedron (20 sided sphere) which surrounds the body. Wigman, on the other hand, concerned herself more with performance. She developed an expressive technique of her own, which used movement, which developed as a direct expression of her inner self. She, like her contemporaries, searched for the answer to life's mysteries. Margaret Lloyd, in *the Borzoi Book of Modern Dance* describes Wigman's dance: "Wigman ... was engrossed with man and his fate; the light of man and his hope shot through the fabric of her dance but sparingly. Her movements were not all in the lower registers, but they were predominately low-keyed, kneeling, crouching, crawling, creeping, falling." (P.13) See the reproductions on pages 25-26 for examples of her work.

Wigman used dance to search for a meaning to her life, and what she found was darkness and negativity. Like many of her contemporaries, the rampant dehumanization

and confusion resulting from 18th century changes in society consumed her. She searched also for a movement style that could express her sadness and loss of hope, and what came out of that search was heavy, grounded, muscular and tension laden movement.

Laban and Wigman were the two best-known Expressionist dancers of their time, but they were not the only ones. Imitators of their work popped up all over Germany, and the world of dance exploded at this time. Dancers believed that dance was for everyone, and there was little concern about technical ability. What mattered most was searching for an expression that would allow for knowledge of the body and soul.

Mary Wigman's Dance

Autumnal Dances
Windswept

Dance of Summer:

Song of fate:

EXPRESSIONIST DANCE: WWII AND BEYOND

The coming of power of the Nazi regime nearly wiped out the Expressionist dance. Many claim that it became obsolete after the Second World War, because the social and political significance that it originally had was lost. While this is partly true, it did not die out all together. Expressionist dance was based more on attitudes about the relationship between the body and soul than on social or political attitudes, and the need to explore that relationship. Because most German Expressionist dancers had either been forced out of the country or forced to practice more traditional dance forms by the Nazis, the art form was no longer widely practiced there after World War II. However, Expressionist ideas were introduced in America in the 1920's and '30's and they began to be developed in the work of American modern dancers. It is largely thanks to these choreographers that certain remnants of the Expressionist style can be seen in the dance of today, and it remains a powerful vehicle of self-expression for some of the dancers of today.

Nazi Germany and Expressionism

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, German dance had reached international prestige. For this reason, according to dance scholar Valerie Preston-Dunlop, it was an ideal tool for the Nazi agenda of promoting German culture throughout the world.

> "The attraction for the Nazis was that the charismatic Laban, and Wigman the high priestess, were both international figures. Students were coming from abroad, from the US and England in particular, to study his notation and his ideas

on creative dance processes and his community dance, and to study her technique, her commitment and her composition." (6)

The fact that these two figures had made such a great name for Germany was seen as proof of the dominance of German artists. However, the success of Expressionist dancers under the Nazi government was short lived. While the Nazis wanted to use Laban and Wigman as promoters of the German culture abroad, it was to be done according to the ideals of the government.

Expressionism was an art form of free thinkers and rebellion, and was seen as potentially threatening to the absolute authority of the government. On May 14, 1934, the Reichskammer was established, which contained a special dance department. By May 17th, the Nazis had established dictates concerning the role of dance under National Socialism. In the words of Preston-Dunlop, "the emphasis was on healthy 'volkish' dance 'German' dance and the elimination of all non-Aryan and 'degenerate' influences." (p.5). Dancers were permitted to continue their work, as long as it coincided with these Nazi dictates, which emphasized German-ness, traditionalism and community.

Within five years of coming to power, Hitler declared Expressionism a "degenerate" art. Expressionist art was confiscated from German museums, and in an *Exhibition of Degenerate Art* that toured Germany in 1937-38, there was an attempt to link Expressionism with "Marxist ideology, so-called Jewish racial characteristics, the 'Nigger art' of Africa and the South Seas, and the work of madmen and 'disturbed minds'" (*Expressionism*, p.184) According to Hitler, the altered reality presented by Expressionists was either a result of some sort of mechanical or congenital defect or a

deliberate attempt to deceive the German public on the part of the artist. Both of these would be cause for alarm and immediate retaliatory action. Therefore, genocidal programs that would clear Germany of these "inferior individuals" were recommended. From this point on, all Expressionist artists and dancers were forced to either leave the country, change the nature of their work, or were killed.

This was the final blow that brought about the end of widespread Expressionist activity in Germany. Laban left the country for England, and although Mary Wigman and other Expressionist dancers remained in Nazi Germany throughout the war, they were forced to either teach more traditional dance forms, like classical ballet, or give up there art all together. After the fall of Nazi Germany, everything associated with it was shunned in both in Germany and by the international community. Despite the fact that the Nazis had blacklisted them, the German Expressionists were associated with the culture of pre-war Germany that had allowed for the rise of Nazi regime. Both the German people and the international community wanted to remove themselves from an association with this culture. German dancers, artists and writers were forced to find a new style, form and message for their work.

Expressionism's Introduction in America

This was not, however, the end of Expressionism. In America, Expressionist dance survived, known as modern dance, with the work of dance pioneer Martha Graham being the strongest continuation of German Expressionist dancers. Graham was the most successful American modern dancer. She had a career that spanned over 70 years. She not only kept Expressionism alive and brought modern dance to

the American public, but also left a legacy of American theatrical dancers and choreographers.

Although there were some exploratory American modern dancers who came before her, Graham was the first whose work had close ties with the German Expressionist dance. She saw dance as a means of expressing personal and human truth, and the desires of the soul. In her biography, Blood Memory, she describes her philosophy of the purpose of dance in the following way: "I feel that the essence of dance is the expression of man – the landscape of his soul. I hope that every dance I do reveals something of myself or some wonderful thing a human can be." (p.6) Many of Graham's dances present a narrative of her emotional and psychological life. She has said that she feels called to express herself through dance in this way, for her personal bodily expressions contain universal truths that ultimately benefit those who see them. See pages 32-33 for reproductions of her work.

The 20th century has been filled with individual dancers and choreographers searching for an answer to the question: "What is the purpose and role of dance?" The Expressionists were among the first to raise that question, turning the tables of classical theatrical dance and setting the stage for all of the changes in dance that took place during the last 50 years. Although ideas and styles have evolved in many different directions, the Expressionist legacy of refusing to accept tradition for its own sake and fulfilling the need to search for a personal meaning in art lives on. Dance in the 1990's is an eclectic array of many styles, forms and philosophies. It has changed very much and many different choreographic personalities have achieved success and public respect since the time of the German Expressionist dancers. As a

result of this, the search for personal stylistic expression is now more than ever before more an honest search for the self less than an issue of rebelling against tradition.

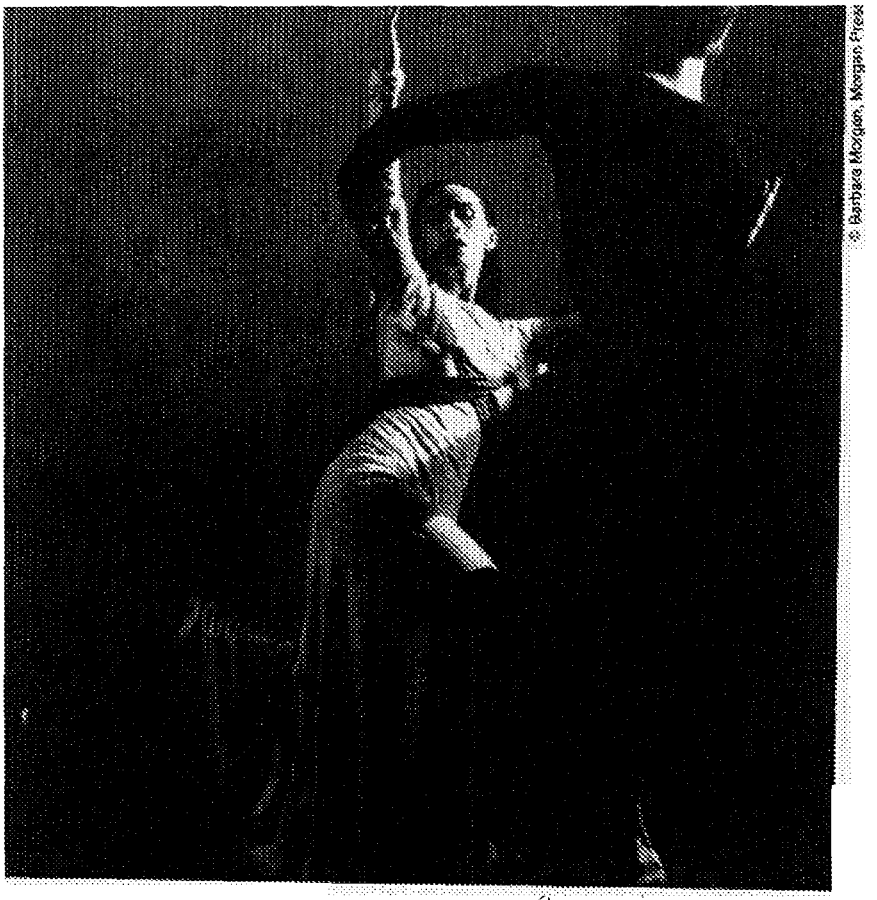
Martha Graham's Dance

Letter to the World →

↓

© Arnold Eagle

Lamentation



American Document

Primitive Mysteries

Frontier

CONCLUSION

"Joint Compound" an Example of Expressionist Dance

As a student of dance, I constantly search for my most fulfilling means of personal expression through movement. Although the results of this search will constantly change throughout my life, I feel at this point in my life that my natural way of working is in the Expressionist genre. A dance that I recently choreographed, "Joint Compound", is Expressionist and can be seen as an example of the elements of Expressionist dance that have survived through the years. Three major elements make "Joint Compound" Expressionist: its purpose, theme and movement style.

The Purpose: revealing and discovering oneself

Expressionist dance is not created simply for its own sake, but rather for the presentation of a deeper personal, emotional or psychological truth. The first element that makes "Joint Compound" an Expressionist dance is the purpose that is served for me the choreographer. Like Graham and Wigman, I use dance to understand my own life and my relationship with my surroundings. JC grew out of the desire to express a personal inner truth that I had discovered and to work through it. By putting my abstract feelings into a dance, I made them more tangible and understandable.

The Theme: outgrowth of personal experience

The Theme of my dance is the power of realizing that one is not alone and that strength can be derived from attaining a support system. Like the Expressionist dancers, I have taken an issue that that I have been thinking about and dealing with in my own life. Based on the feelings of isolated suffering that are contained in Philip Larkin's poem

Deceptions, (see page 5), I created the first half of my dance. In it five dancers move simultaneously, yet are so wrapped up in their personal pain and suffering that they do not notice the others around them. In the second half of the dance, the solo dancers find each other and begin moving together, creating a community. This community is not void of pain, but her association with the others strengthens each of the five dancers. This culminates in a collapse at the end, which represents exhaustion from hurting and a hope to begin again. In creating this dance, I express what I see as a basic human truth, giving insight into how I see the world and opening that up to the interpretation of others. The Expressionists, in dealing with their own pain and reactions to the environment, show perspectives on their time period and the kind of life that can be lived in it.

Movement Style: individualistic and tension-laden

For the movement that the dancers did in this piece, I tried to allow room for personal style and interpretation within a set framework. I drew on each girl's unique movement style, and used that movement style to create five characters. Although most of the movement was grounded, heavy and muscular, there was still a certain amount of variety. The personalities were worked out as follows: Lamaiya (purple shirt and black pants) was powerful and angry. I gave her many jumps and tense movements. Heather (red shirt and black pants) was tormented and confused. Her movement involved extreme level changes, explosive jumps, falls and bursts of energy. Christina (yellow shirt) was afraid to go anywhere unknown. Her movement was confined to a small circle of space and was mostly upper body. It was very much about using dynamics to make simple movements into expressive gestures. Heidi was afraid to face the world. Her movement always faced the walls, was sustained, remained on a medium level and

involved quite a bit of gliding and reaching through the space. Ariel (pink leotard and skirt) was afraid to be herself. She was the only dancer who never really established a personal dance style. Her movement was just an imitation of what the others were doing.

I allowed the dancers free to interpret the movement and music as they wished, giving minimum guidelines in these areas. In the second section of the dance, the dancers come together and do more uniform movements. Still, although they are given a set movement and musical cue, I allowed them stylistic freedom. Like the Expressionists, I respect individual body types and believe that each individual should have the freedom to explore her preferred way of moving.

Bibliography

Bronner, Stephen, *Passion and Rebellion: the Expressionist Heritage*, NY:Columbia University Press, 1988

DeMille Agnes, *Martha*, NY: Vintage Books, 1992

Deutscher Expressionismus, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery, University of Huston, 1977

Gordon, Donald E., *Expressionism: art and idea*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987

Hall, Fernau, *World Dance*, NY: A.A, Wyn, 1954

Laban, Rudolf von, *Die Welt des Tanzers*, Stuttgart, W. Seifert, 1920

Lloyd, Margaret, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, NJ: Dance Horizon, 1949

Makela, Maria Marth, *The Munich Succession*, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979

Mann, Thomas, *Gesamelte Werke*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1960

Preston-Dunlop, Valerie, *Schrifttanz*, London: Dance Books; Pennington: NJ: Distributed in USA by Princeton Book, Co, 1990

Terry, Walter, *I was There*, NY: Audience Arts, 1978

Thornton, Samuel, *A movement perspective of Rudolf Laban*, London, Macdonald and Evans, 1971

Weiss, Peg, *Kandinsky in Munich*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979

Wigman, Mary, *The Language of Dance*, Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1966

Wigman, Mary, *The Mary Wigman Book*, Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1975